

I WON

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Character

Natasha - 16 years old

NATASHA

She hates me, I know that. That pimple-faced twerp is a total loser. She didn't even finish the 8th grade. She never was very pretty and now she looks like a cadaver.

Who cares about her? She brought it on herself. It's her own fault. Even her mom disowns her now.

I saw it myself, how her mother screamed at her in the hall. She's our neighbor, seven families live in our old wooden house, and she's yelling, I don't know who you are, you're no daughter of mine, my baby was normal, not some junkie all sick with AIDS so I can't even touch you, so get the hell outta here, get outta my sight and all that kind of stuff. And the very next day I have a piano exam and I'm sitting there practicing.

So when all the screaming starts my mom goes out there and says to her mom that all these problems of yours are yours and would you quit screaming because if your daughter's a junkie why does that have to reflect on my daughter and she said she'd call the cops. So I guess her mom got scared and went back inside and slammed the door and we didn't hear anything more from her. Mom, though, could see my whole body was shaking and she gave me a Zoloft and walked me to my room. She gave me a big hug and says, "Now do you see why I don't want you out on the streets?" But I've known that for a long time. Well, not really known it, I'm just used to the idea.

Ever since I was a kid my mother always kept me busy in classes and lessons and things. First it was dance class, then it was swimming lessons, then it was music and now it's TV. I mean, look, I'm 16 and I already have certificates from, one) dance classes at an arts school, two) from a teenage swim section, three) I took first place in the city meet and second in the county meet. Plus I have a bunch of other certificates - from singing classes at music school, and from the TV studio where I host this teenage program with this other boy.

Basically, it was the TV studio that saved me.

Before that nobody cared anything about me at school. No, I mean people were all right, I'm no slob. I always let everybody copy off my test answers but where do you think all the girls go after classes? They hit the streets. And it's out there where all the big decisions get made - like who gets the cold shoulder next, who gets framed, and how you lift money from your parents to go to the dance.

That never had anything to do with me, though. Like I say, everybody was fine.

Nobody ever tried to pull anything on me. I even went to a concert with them once. This was, like, two years ago when the big news was that one of those teeny-bop groups was coming over to play from the next city. Mom came to me herself and said, Natasha, you probably want to go to the concert. I can't say I really did, but Mom gave me the money anyway so I could buy a new outfit. I had to do something to justify her concern about me so I went.

I really hated the concert because by then I was already studying singing and it only took me a couple of listens to know I hated those songs. Plus the mix in the hall was really bad.

And then that neighbor girl of mine who got kicked out of her house somehow got past the guards with a couple of her boyfriends and some vodka and they were drinking right there on the dance floor out of plastic cups. One of the guys she was with started grabbing her from behind and right there in front of everybody she starts kissing him! I thought I was going to barf when he stuck his tongue in her mouth. I mean it's obviously none of my business, but still it's a drag to have to see something like that and know that someone like that lives on the other side of the wall from you. I wonder how old she was then? Fourteen, I guess, since we're the same age. Only she was a year behind me in school because she flunked a grade once.

After that, when the concert was almost over and half the girls in the place had black cheeks from all the mascara that was dripping down their faces, she came up to me and whispered real quiet in my ear: "Think you're all squeaky clean, huh? Love your

mommy and everybody thinks you're so nice? I hate you. I hate everybody like you. I wish you'd die, bitch. Croak and roll over. And when you die I'm going to dance on your grave, you got that?" Her mouth was all red with lipstick smeared all over it and the bronzer on her cheeks was all caked up. She smelled of really cheap perfume, cigarettes and alcohol. I didn't even say anything to her. I probably couldn't say anything to her even now because she's such a twerp and there isn't a day that goes by when she doesn't get called up in front of the whole school for misbehaving or not doing her homework. What could you say to her? So I just went home. I had this feeling like somebody had tarred and feathered me.

When I got home I told my mom everything and that's when she said something to me I think was really right. She said, "Natasha, I'll talk to her mom if you want me to. But I think it's best just to ignore it. Best not to mess with idiots and fools. Why stoop to their level?" So I just started ignoring her.

We used to go out to catch the bus at the same time. We'd stand there at the stop as far apart from each other as we could. But even in the morning fog I could see that look on her face; it was this look that she used to burn up everything around her. She always had a cold back then and she never wore gloves so her hands would go red as beets with these groady white skin cracks from the cold. If I had cracks like that I'd probably go out of my mind. It's really ugly and disgusting. Hands like sandpaper are disgusting even when boys have them, but it's really awful for a girl. When I started in at the TV station and the pilot was aired she scribbled a word on our door that I'm not even going to repeat. Takes one to know one.

It was really weird how it all happened with the TV station. This woman from the television studio came to our class and said she was going to pick some teenagers for a children's program, you know, so they'd be the hosts and stuff. Kind of like an audition or something, but for kids. All the boys in our class are morons so they all said, what are we fags or something, and they refused to take part. And because of this audition thing they even cancelled our history lesson, so all

the boys split for home and all the girls headed for the bathroom to fix their makeup.

If this all happened after classes, I would never have ended up on TV because my whole day was already taken up - that day I had singing lessons after school and then I had to get home to do my homework before going to swim lessons in the evening. But since there was the time to do it, I figured why not try? It might be interesting. Anyway, I have really voluminous hair and I always look good in photographs as long as I don't blink. They call that being photogenic. Oval and diamond-shaped faces are all photogenic - square and oblong ones aren't. It's really easy to test, all you have to do is trace the form of your face with a pencil and then you can see if you're photogenic or not.

When I went into the bathroom the place was packed. Girls from every grade were jostling for position in front of the mirrors and fights were almost breaking out over it. She was there too, only not in front of the mirror. She was staring at her reflection in one of the shiny tiles on the wall and was drawing something with her finger. I ended up right next to her. I even felt sorry for her because it was obvious that no TV show was going to hire her - she was scrawny and pale and had bags under her eyes. People look better dead than that. But there she was, looking at her reflection. She even asked me in a croaky voice if I had a pocket mirror. I rummaged around in my bag and found one and gave it to her. She looked at herself in it, ran her fingers through her hair, pulled some lipstick out of her pocket and made up her lips. Then she hauls off and slams my mirror into the wall. A million little glass particles went flying like dust. I say, what the hell are you doing? That was mine. And she just shrugs her shoulders and says, sorry, I didn't mean to. I wanted to hit her. I wanted to rip her into shreds at that moment. But I remembered what Mom said and just walked away real quiet-like and went out of the bathroom. The other girls told me later that they wanted to stick up for me and really let her have it, but they figured why get all messed up before the audition. They had done their 'dos up fancy with hair spray and everything, but all I did was tie my hair in a pony tail like I always do. Once I read in one of

Mom's magazines that being natural is the most stylish thing there is.

They took us all to the auditorium and there were three people sitting there - some woman, two guys and a cameraman who was putting up this blue screen. Later on we found out the woman was the show's editor Vera Semyonova. and the guys were Andrei Panov, the director - who asked us to just call him Andrei - and one other director named Vasily Kapustin, who doesn't work in TV but has a children's theater. The cameraman was just Slava Zhivodyorov and he was only 18 but they made him take a pseudonym because you can't have a name like Zhivodyorov on TV.

So then the audition started. They called us up one by one. You didn't have to really do anything, just talk a little about yourself in front of the camera and then tell a joke or some funny story that happened with you. If you knew how, you could sing or dance. All the girls froze up in front of the camera and they giggled and hid their faces or, on the contrary, started behaving like total idiots, dragging out their words and trying to talk like a TV personality. Problem is it sounded really stupid and it made it sound like they had all gone nuts. Most of the time Vera Semyonova cut them off short and said, thank you, that's enough, and called the next one. Finally it was Her turn. She walks out there and sits down in front of the camera. She was really calm, although I could see her hands were shaking. They asked her to tell about herself. And she starts in really calmlike as if she were sitting at home or just talking to us and not to a panel of people from the TV station. But who wants to know anything about her? As if we didn't know too much already.

She talked for a really long time and I started to get worried because I was next in line and it was almost time for me to go to my singing lessons already. I don't remember what she told them that day, I only remember that when they asked her what she liked she said I like to sit alone in my room when nobody's at home and I like it when snow turns into sleet and you can stand and watch it forever on the porch.

Basically she put it very nicely, but that's all fine and dandy to stand around on the porch when you

have nothing but time on your hands and there's no limit to how long you can run around the streets with your friends, but what about when you don't even have enough time to do your homework and you have to finish it up during breaks between classes? Anyway, I got lost in my own thoughts like that and when I snapped out of it she was still talking her head off and was all sprawled out in her chair like she was sitting on a park bench with her friends talking endlessly about herself. Everybody was wondering when they were finally going to cut her off and say, thanks that's enough, but nobody in the panel said anything and they just kept listening to everything she said. I was about ready to blow off this audition and leave for my music lesson when she finally stopped and Vera Semyonova called out my name - Natalya Vernikova.

I went up there, sat down and kept trying to keep my back straight, because a straight back is one of the guarantors of beauty - something else I read in one of Mom's magazines. I told about myself, my achievements, my music school, my dance lessons and my swimming competitions. Andrei the director asked how I would have time to host his show when I had so many other things to do. I told him that the main thing is to plan your time well, and, if necessary, I could ask my teachers and trainers to let me off on the days when the show was taped. Then they asked me to sing something. I sang one really old song in English - we were learning it just then at music school. Basically, that's all they said to me and, like they did with everyone, they wrote down my number, my parents' work phones, and they asked what my parents did. Both of my parents have really interesting professions. I have always liked saying that my mother is a psychologist for a big company and my father teaches English at the institute.

That day I was ten minutes late to practice but I had a legitimate excuse and so my music teacher Anastasia Pavlova was really happy for me. She said, maybe we'll be seeing you on TV soon, Natasha, maybe you'll be a big star. In fact I never had any desire to be a star. It's just that I like performing at concerts and taking part in competitions because it gives you

some proof that you're not just a little girl, not just some common person, but that you are able and you know how to do things that others can't. Plus after every concert Mom always buys a cake or makes a pie. Then we all sit down as a family and Mom and Dad drink wine and I have juice and we don't even turn on the television set - we all discuss my concert or the competition I was in. Dad always records everything on video and then we watch and everybody discusses it. Dad, for example, always praises me but Mom'll say something like, "That dress doesn't go with your shoes," or, "I told you to take my hairspray - you're hair looks a mess." But I know that Mom just talks like that in order to be different from Dad and me. My mom believes that every person should have his or her own special quality, that a well-rounded person is a person who knows how to communicate with people without being like everyone else. My mom has a whole closet full of clothes and a friend of hers who is a seamstress keeps making her new stuff all the time because Mom says that buying clothes in the store is the quickest way to end up looking like everyone else. I have a couple of dresses made by Mom's seamstress, too, but to tell you the truth, I don't like to wear them because then half the school stares me down like I'm a wild animal or something. Dad sometimes says to Mom, your desire to be different is going to bankrupt us someday. My Dad is really smart. He knows five languages. I only know English so far. Dad wanted to teach me French but then they decided I should finish music school first or my head might explode from all my studies. Actually, it was Mom who decided that. It's just that Dad wants me to apply to his foreign language institute but Mom wants me to be an actor or a musician. She says, I don't care where you go to school, so long as you like it and you aren't like all the others. I have a feeling that I don't really want to be all that different because then I simply won't have any free time left at all and, to tell you the truth, I would like to have a boyfriend. I mean that's what I used to want. Because now there's Sergeyev - but let's skip over that for now.

About a week later the vice-principal comes up and says I'm supposed to be at the local TV station at

three o'clock. All I have to do is give my name at the desk and somebody will come out and get me. Obviously I realized I got the job because this wasn't happening with anybody else. At first I thought I'd call Mom with the good news but then I decided to go there first. What if I was wrong? I could barely sit still through the rest of classes and then I raced over to music school and told them I couldn't make lessons today. Anastasia wished me well and gave me a pendant in the shape of an apple - kind of like a good luck charm.

I went to the television station like the vice principal told me and I stated my name. Vera Semyonova came down to meet me and she took me to the studio. Well, not the studio itself, at first, but to her office. She congratulated me and said I had passed the audition and that in a few weeks I would begin lessons with a coach and the show would start filming. She asked me not to use any makeup and not to cut my hair. And then it turned out they found a boy to be my partner at another school. He was younger than me but that was actually better because we created the impression that we were brother and sister or old childhood friends and that suited the conception of the program as a whole. She and I talked briefly and she gave me a script. She asked me to memorize it more or less by the next time we met because, even though there would be this teleprompter thing giving us the lines - that's this thing that newscasters read the news off of - she said it would be better for us to know the lines until we got used to it all.

I told her I had no questions and when I was already out in the hall I heard someone talking in the next office. I know it's not right to snoop on other people's conversations, but I heard my name and I really wasn't snooping, I just started walking more slowly. The people talking were the same two men who had been at the audition, Andrei the director, and Vasily Kapustin, the guy from the children's theaters. Andrei had this loud voice so I could hear him even without trying. "Tell me again, please, why we're taking this Vernikova or Varnikova girl or whatever her name is and not the Skvortsova girl?" He was talking about Her. That's what Her name was. And then I heard him say, "I think this Skvortsova girl has much more

potential. She has more talent hands down than your Vernikova." Vasily Kapustin spoke up as though he was on the defensive, and he says, "Andrei, I know this girl. She was in one of the psychological support groups we run. She is a very difficult child, very high maintenance. Consider this - you schedule a shoot, all the guests are there, and your girl doesn't show. Where are you going to find her? Or let's say she throws a temper tantrum during a shoot. I'm telling you, Andrei, this girl is psychologically unstable." I didn't listen to any more. All of a sudden I had no desire to call Mom and no desire to host this TV show. If I'm such a loser, how come you're hiring me? Just because I'm stable, is that it? Our class monitor Lena is as stable as a rock and just about as capable. So why not hire her, then? And what's so much more talented about THAT one than me? Because she sat there splayed out on the chair and kept mumbling forever? Her diction is terrible and she'll never be anything but mediocre!

I came home really angry and I didn't even want to eat. Naturally, Mom started in riding my case right away - "What happened, Natasha?" I wasn't planning on saying anything but my mom is a psychologist and she could even break down James Bond. In fact, she ought to be a spy herself. Anyway, I told her everything just like it was. Mom looks at me and says, "Natasha, every person's opinion is subjective. And in the end you're the one they hired. And that wasn't because they were afraid Skvortsova might not show up to a shoot, but because, in addition to the fact that you're a talented person, you are also a very responsible girl. Think about it: There were hundreds of candidates and you're the only one they chose." Mom's words calmed me down a bit and Mom and I sat down in my room to read the script. I memorized it really quickly, it was very simple. A lot simpler than memorizing Shakespeare's sonnets. It was made even simpler because I would just say the lines and Mom would check against the script if I was doing it right or not. So I didn't even have to waste time looking up the next lines in the script.

I started working with a coach a week after that. They introduced me to my cohost Petya Mamochkin - funny name, huh? Like he's a momma's boy or something. He was

a toe-headed kid who came up to my chin. I have no idea how he won the audition. He's really funny, of course. A born actor. But he can't sit still for half a second. He's curious about everything and from the start he was always bugging the cameramen with questions, and he started in right away making faces for the camera. Vera Semyonova finally even had to tell him to knock it off.

They told us we should basically play ourselves. Petya is this hyperactive kid who's always getting into trouble, while I, on the other hand, am like his older sister who always does the right thing and has to get him out of hot water all the time. They decided that the pilot - that's the very first show - would be taped for broadcast and then after that the show would be shot live, and kids would call in to ask us questions and we would talk with them. We learned what a lav was - that's a little microphone that gets clipped on under your clothes. We learned what an IFB was - that's like a microphone too but this one you wear so you can hear what the director is saying when you're on air. We learned what the hot camera is - that's the one that's shooting you right now. It's really easy. All you have to do is follow whichever camera has the red light on at any moment. That's the hot one and that's the one you look at. They explained the conception of the program to us - that was really easy, too. The point is to tell young people about the lives of other young people, to air stories on social issues and educational spots and reports about all kinds of kids' festivals and children's achievements. Naturally, the reporters weren't kids, but journalism students, so Petya and I were the youngest of everybody there.

Also we were supposed to have in-studio guests - these would be kids who had done something unusual, or adults who were involved with kids in some way. The show was called "Our World." It took about two days to shoot, and then they filmed us again with two girls who won a county gymnastics competition. The girls were really nervous and that's when I began to feel like a real television host because I constantly had to redo and rethink the questions they had given me in the script in order to loosen the girls up. Plus they looked at Petya and me as if we were from some other planet. But, really, what's the big deal, asking people

questions in front of a camera?

It was right after this interview with these girls that I was introduced to Sergeev. I'd seen him before, this really tall, light-haired guy with an earring in his ear. He had gorgeous eyes, really deep; even if he's just looking around it seems like he's doing more than that. The cameraman Slava introduced us. Turns out that Sergeev's name was Sasha and he worked at the station as a sound engineer although he'd never been to any school for that. It's just that he loves music and everything to do with sound and so he got a job here right out of high school. He's only 21 but there's already talk about promoting him to chief sound engineer, or at least that's what Slava told me later. He's really a talented guy. Getting acquainted was no big deal. Slava said, "This is Natasha," and Sasha introduced himself. He said, "Are you always so stern or are you just staying in character?" Naturally, I laughed. And then somebody called for him and, anyway, I had to go to swim lessons. When I was in the pool I kept thinking that he was swimming alongside me and I kept grinning to myself.

Three days before the first airing they started running ads for the show. I began seeing my face on TV more than in the mirror. Our telephone didn't stop ringing. All of Mom's friends were going out of their minds, calling and congratulating her as if she was the one hosting the show, not me. Petya and I continued working with our coach Vasily - mostly it was speech work, exercises and things like tongue-twisters or toy-boat-toy-boat-toy-boat. That stuff'll really tie up your tongue. But I didn't have any trouble with it because we do similar stuff at music school. Petya was much slower at it than me.

Sometimes Andrei the director would come to our sessions and I always felt really awkward. I could really feel that he didn't like me. He only ever praised Petya and he wouldn't even look at me. Andrei would tell us about the unexpected things that might happen on air and how to answer the questions of callers and how to react if a call was suddenly cut off. Basically, we memorized all that really quickly. Petya would ask them to repeat things 10 times over,

but that wasn't because he was stupid, it was because he had an attention span deficit and he always had tons of questions. Andrei even asked once, "Petya, are you sure you're 14 and not five?" Petya naturally began acting like a five year-old, making faces and picking his nose and Andrei almost fell off his chair laughing.

That's more or less how our tutorials went up until our first live broadcast. I even began skipping every other music lesson because everything at the TV studio was so much more interesting. But the main thing - I don't even know why it's the main thing - was that I saw Sasha there all the time. We hardly ever talked, we would just say hello. But every time he saw me he would purse his brow and make some kind of really gloomy face and I would crack up like I was crazy. Sometimes he would say, "So, Miss Perfection, are we going singing or going swimming?" I guess Vera Semyonova had told everybody that I had all kinds of activities outside the studio.

So our first show was aired. Mom and Dad and I turned the TV on a half-hour before it started and Dad put a new video in the machine so he could start taping the instant the show began. I was nothing but nerves. I couldn't eat and I couldn't drink. Dad took me on his knee like when I was little and he held my hand so I wouldn't be nervous. And then the show began. Naturally I knew everything that was going to happen but I was still incredibly tense. Forty minutes flew by like two seconds, only Mom was constantly going "Oh! Oh!" like, "Oh how pretty you are," or "Oh, what a good angle," so that Dad finally said, "Irina, let's leave the rapture until later!"

When the show ended I thought the telephone was going to explode. Mom's friends and Dad's colleagues and my classmates and my music teacher Anastasia and my swim trainer and my home class teacher all called. I had the impression that every single person in the city had watched that program. My tongue started dragging on the floor from thanking everybody for their good wishes. A little later Petya called and said, "Hey, Natasha! Bottoms up! We slayed 'em!" Then he whinnied like a donkey and hung up the phone.

After my sixth conversation with one of Mom's friends I came to the conclusion that I was a rare genius and so I asked Dad to let me go out for a walk outside because a seventh conversation like that was going to do me in. My brain would have blown up and I would have died from a big head.

There was never much of anything to do in the courtyard of our house so I went down to the park. It's really pretty there in fall, only it's too bad I don't get there very often. I sat down on a bench and just sat there looking at my shoes and the leaves on the ground. And suddenly I see Sasha going by - I recognized his orange jacket - and he was with Her. Sasha was holding her hand and they didn't even see me. They went right past and then stopped a little further behind the trees. That's when I heard her burst into tears and he hugged her and said something real quite-like. I couldn't hear what it was. Just one sentence - "it's just a..." "Just a..." He probably said something like, "it's just a TV show" or something. That's probably what she was crying about, that they didn't take her and she kept hoping until the last minute that they would change their minds. And then today it all became clear when she saw Petya and me on the tube instead of her. So I aced her out and now she aces me, I thought. Although so what, really? I couldn't care less about her or Sasha. There wasn't anything between Sasha and me, just a little joking in the halls. But I wonder what they have in common? Sasha's really talented and smart. People have high hopes for him. But her? She can't even finish school, they keep holding her back. At least she quit using makeup because she was really starting to look like a slut. What the hell do they see in her, Andrei and Sasha, getting her into support groups and things? Just because she's mentally unstable? I could cry my eyes out or throw a tantrum myself, or run away and disappear. Is anybody going to love me more for that? All these questions totally wiped out whatever euphoria I was experiencing and I went home. From home I called Petya and his little sister answered. She said, "Petya? Petya's pooping right now!" And she started giggling as if someone was tickling her. I guess their whole family's like that - a bunch of clowns. I felt like laughing too, but I just

said goodbye and hung up the phone.

When we were going to bed Mom came into my room and we talked about the program for a long time, about my plans for my life, about what a great opportunity this was for me, and that I had every chance of starting a fine career right now if I would show off my good side and let them know I was interested and able to learn quickly.

Towards the end I asked her, "Mom, what do you do to get a boy to notice you?" I'd never asked her anything like that but I'm sure that when she studied psychology at the institute they taught her things like that. It was like a light bulb went on inside Mom and she said, "Tell me all about it." I told her about Sasha, but only up to the point when I saw him in the park with Her. I didn't want to tell about the park. Then Mom explained that all Sasha's funny faces and teasing are called "flirting," and that means he likes me too only he just doesn't know how to approach me yet. She asked me to describe Sasha's character and his likes. When she found out Sasha likes music, she told me to start with that. I mean, I'm studying music, too, so we ought to have some common interests. She told me to find out what kind of music he likes to make it easier to get a conversation going.

I found out about his favorite music the next day. There was a reception at the studio in honor of the first broadcast and Petya and I were invited. So I just went up to Sasha and asked him, "What music do you like?" I mean, how else are you going to find out? Seemed like a regular kind of question to me. Sasha named a couple of groups, I don't remember them all. I'd listened to a couple with Dad - Portishead and Marchibu, for example. I knew a little bit about Nirvana, but I still had to find something by Sonic Youth and somebody else. But then I didn't have to do any of that because when I was getting ready to leave, Sasha came up and offered to go with me. We walked really slowly - I hadn't walked like that since I don't know when. I was always running everywhere. And we talked about everything, about our TV program, about music and then we switched over into English - turned out that he spoke English really well. We played a

little game to see who could remember the most English sayings. When we got to my place I said, "Sasha, I'm definitely going to listen to all those groups you named." And he said, "Don't worry about it. You're beautiful anyway." He kissed me on the cheek and left. I didn't even know what to think about it. Either he meant that there could be nothing between us or, on the contrary, he liked me no matter what. I spent the whole night going crazy over that. I didn't have the nerve to ask Mom about it, though.

The next day everything was obvious - when I got to the studio Sasha asked for my phone number and we started talking every evening, and not only then. Usually he met me after swimming and we'd go get something to eat. Then he'd walk me home. We talked a lot, literally about everything. Usually I'm not talkative at all, I always try to keep my mind on what I'm doing and not waste time blabbering. Now I couldn't keep my mouth shut. Everybody at school told me I had really changed, and it's true. For the first time ever I enjoyed going out with the girls during break and talking, or sending notes back and forth in class. I even secretly told one of the girls about Sasha. Naturally, the whole class knew about it the next day, but I liked the way it made me feel like Britney Spears and having everybody guessing who I'd have my next fling with. The teachers all began treating me differently. My home room teacher said, "Natasha, you have become a model for all the girls, so, please, keep in mind the responsibility you bear." She said that as if I used to smoke and hang out on the street!

As for Her, she quit coming to school at all. I heard rumors that the cops were looking for her, that she ran away from home with some guy and nobody knows where she is. I know for a fact that she left home, because we're neighbors. As for the rest... What worried me the most were the rumors about the guy. Even though Sasha and I saw each other almost every day and we'd already kissed five times and we talked about everything together, I still hadn't worked up the courage to ask about Her. I asked in all kinds of ways, like, "Sasha, did you have a girl before me?" He'd say, "Of course, but what do you care about that?" I'd ask

him, "Have you ever dated anyone from my school?" And he'd say, "Do you think I remember what school every girl I date went to?" Then he looked at me really long and hard and he said, "Natasha, what is it you're trying to ask me?"

And then I couldn't stand it anymore because I was tired of trying to trick him. And I asked him right out: "What was this between you and Natasha Skvortsova?" - she's a Natasha, too - "And do you know where she is right now?" Sasha didn't say anything but he lowered his eyes. He said, "Yeah, I know her. She's living with me right now." It was like someone dumped hot scalding water over me. Like shoving ice down my back. I turned around and headed for home, as fast as I could, running almost. Sasha walked behind me for a long time, almost until I got home, and then he grabbed me by the arm. But I'm in good shape with all my swimming and I shoved him so hard he fell down. When I got inside the idea came to me that I could tell on her, I could inform her parents, and anyway, that would probably be the right thing to do. It would be a good deed, if you think about it. But I didn't. So let her live with him, I thought. Let him live with her if he wants. He called me that evening. Asked me to forgive him. He said there was nothing between them but that there are just people he feels sorry for and that he wants to help because, basically, they're good people. He said this girl had problems with her parents and drugs and that she needed support. I had no desire to hear any of this trash, I said: "Choose. It's either her or me." He sighed and said, "All right, Natasha. I understand." And he hung up.

I figured that was it. He chose her. I went into the bathroom and turned on the water. I stood there forever looking at Dad's razors. Then I thought, I've got my piano exam in two days and tomorrow is my first day doing a live broadcast. And anyway my mother and father would never forgive me. So I guess I'll just have to live a little longer. That's what life is for - to tough it out. I went to the kitchen, took a Zoloft and went to bed.

The next day after the broadcast, after Mom kissed

me up one side and down the other, and Dad gave me the first jade ring I ever owned in my life, I could hear Her mother kicking her out of the house again. So. That means he kicked her out, too.

That means I won.

I won.

I won.

I won.

Darkness